



Rock the Schoolhouse

Jim Stergios on the best ways to lead tomorrow's America

[An expert's view of Common Core's focus on nonfiction texts](#)

Posted by Jim Stergios August 30, 2012 02:35 PM E-mail



([Gretchen Ertl for *The New York Times*](#))

The Common Core national standards are increasingly controversial, with Utah, Indiana and a number of states that had adopted them now reconsidering. [A recent *New York Times* education blog](#) notes the following:

Forty-four states and United States territories have adopted the Common Core Standards and, according to this recent *Times* article, one major change teachers can expect to see is more emphasis on reading “informational,” or nonfiction, texts across subject areas:

While English classes will still include healthy amounts of fiction, the standards say that students should be reading more nonfiction texts as they get older, to prepare them for the kinds of material they will read in college and careers. In the fourth grade, students should be reading about the same amount from “literary” and “informational” texts, according to

the standards; in the eighth grade, 45 percent should be literary and 55 percent informational, and by 12th grade, the split should be 30/70.

And seeing itself as a potential vendor, the *Times* chirps cheerfully:

“Well, *The New York Times* and *The Learning Network* are here to help.”

There’s been a lot written on the loss of literature in curricula around the country. And there is good reason for that. [As I noted in testimony to the Utah Education Interim Committee](#):

“Massachusetts’ remarkable rise on national assessments is not because we aligned our reading standards to the NAEP. Rather, it is because, unlike Common Core, our reading standards emphasized high-quality literature. Reading literature requires the acquisition in a compressed timeframe of a richer and broader vocabulary than non-fiction texts. Vocabulary acquisition is all-important in the timely development of higher-level reading skills.”

But even if you agree with the idea of refocusing our classrooms on nonfiction texts, what is the quality of the offerings suggested by Common Core, a set of standards copyrighted by two Washington-based entities (the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#) and the [National Governors Association](#))?

I can think of no one whose opinion might be better informed on the topic than Massachusetts’ own Will Fitzhugh, who founded [The Concord Review](#) in 1987 and has received numerous prizes and appointments as a result of his work there. For those who aren’t familiar with [The Concord Review](#), it is a quarterly journal that:

“has now published 1,033 exemplary history research papers (average 6,000 words), on a huge variety of topics, by high school students from 46 states and 38 other countries. The journal accepts about 6% of the papers submitted.”

In a January 2011 piece highlighting his work, [then-education reporter Sam Dillon of The New York Times noted](#) that Fitzhugh:

“showcases high school research papers, sits at his computer in a cluttered office above a secondhand shop here, deploring the nation’s declining academic standards...

...His mood brightens, however, when talk turns to the occasionally brilliant work of the students whose heavily footnoted history papers appear in his quarterly, *The Concord Review*. Over 23 [25] years, the *Review* has printed 924 [1,033] essays by teenagers from 44 [46] states and 39 nations...”

Fitzhugh is deeply concerned by the fact that the majority of students pack up their duffelbags and computers, and head off to college without ever having completed a genuine research paper on history. *The Concord Review* has been a labor of love that seeks to change that sad state of affairs. In a piece entitled “Skip the Knowledge!” published in [EducationViews.org](#) at the start of August 2012, Fitzhugh articulated his view on the value of Common Core in getting students to be truly college-ready in reading and writing non-fiction texts:

“It is not clear whether the knowledge-free curricula of the graduate schools of education, or the Core experiences at Harvard College, in any way guided the authors of our new Common Core in their achievement of the understanding that it is not knowledge of

anything that our students require, but Thinking Skills. They took advantage of the perspective and arguments of a famous cognitive psychologist at Stanford in designing the history portion of the Core. Just think how much time they saved by not involving one of those actual historians, who might have bogged down the whole enterprise in claiming that students should have some knowledge of history itself, and that such knowledge might actually be required before any useful Thinking Skills could be either acquired or employed. If we had followed that path, we might actually be asking high school students to read real history books—shades of the James Madison era!!

Poor James Madison, back in the day, spending endless hours reading scores upon scores of books on the history of governments, as he prepared to become the resident historian and intellectual “father” of the United States Constitution in the summer of 1787 in Philadelphia! If he had only known what we know now thanks to the new Common Core, he could have saved the great bulk of that time and effort if he had only acquired some Thinking Skills instead!”

In a piece entitled “[Turnabout](#),” which came out Tuesday, Fitzhugh goes further.

“The New Common Core Standards call for a 50% reduction in “literary” [aka fictional non-informational texts] readings for students, and an increase in nonfiction informational texts, so that students may be better prepared for the nonfiction they will encounter in college and at work.

In addition to memos, technical manuals, and menus (and bus schedules?), the nonfiction informational texts suggested include *The Gettysburg Address*, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Abraham Lincoln’s *Second Inaugural Address*, and perhaps one of the *Federalist Papers*.

History books, such as those by David Hackett Fischer, James McPherson, David McCullough, Ron Chernow, Paul Johnson, Martin Gilbert, etc. are not among the nonfiction informational texts recommended, perhaps to keep students from having to read any complete books while they are still in high school.

In the spirit of Turnabout, let us consider saving students more time from their fictional non-informational text readings (previously known as literature) by cutting back on the complete novels, plays and poems formerly offered in our high schools. For instance, instead of *Pride and Prejudice* (the whole novel), students could be asked to read Chapter Three. Instead of the complete *Romeo and Juliet*, they could read Act Two, Scene Two, and in poetry, instead of a whole sonnet, perhaps just alternate stanzas could be assigned. In this way, they could get the “gist” of great works of literature, enough to be, as it were, “grist” for their deeper analytic cognitive thinking skill mills.

As the goal is to develop deeply critical analytic cognitive thinking skills, surely there is no need to read a whole book either in English or in History classes. This will not be a loss in Social Studies classes, since they don’t assign complete books anyway, but it may be a wrench for English teachers who probably still think that there is some value in reading a whole novel, or a whole play, or even a complete poem.

But change is change is change, as Gertrude Stein might have written, and if our teachers are to develop themselves professionally to offer the new deeper cognitive analytic thinking skills required by the Common Core Standards, they will just have to learn to wean themselves from the old notions of knowledge and understanding they have tried to develop from readings for students in the past.

As Caleb Nelson wrote in 1990 in *The Atlantic Monthly*, speaking about an older Common Core at Harvard College:

The philosophy behind the [Harvard College] Core is that educated people are not those who have read many books and have learned many facts but rather those who could analyze facts if they should ever happen to encounter any, and who could 'approach' books if it were ever necessary to do so...

The New Common Core Standards are meant to prepare our students to think deeply on subjects they know practically nothing about, because instead of reading a lot about anything, they will have been exercising their critical cognitive analytical faculties on little excerpts amputated from their context. So they can think “deeply,” for example, about Abraham Lincoln’s *Second Inaugural Address*, while knowing nothing about the nation’s Founding, or Slavery, or the new Republican Party, or, of course, the American Civil War.

Students’ new Common academic work with texts about which they will be asked to Think & Learn Deeply, may encourage them to believe that ignorance is no barrier to useful thinking, in the same way that those who have written the Common Core Standards believe that they can think deeply about and make policy for our many state education systems, without having spent much, if any time, as teachers themselves, or even in meeting with teachers who have the experience they lack.

It may very well turn out that ignorance and incompetence transfer from one domain to another much better than deeper thinking skills do, and that the current mad flight from knowledge and understanding, while clearly very well funded, has lead to Standards which will mean that our high school students [those that do not drop out] will need even more massive amounts of remediation when they go on to college and the workplace than are presently on offer...”

“Turnabout” may mean many things, including fair play, or a reversal of direction. But the more that serious people look at it, the more Common Core is looking like an attempt to revive that merry-go-round of ed fads that have never worked in American education—and are best abandoned.

http://boston.com/community/blogs/rock_the_schoolhouse/2012/08/an_experts_view_of_common_core.html

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